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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: National Intelligence Officer, USSR  
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SUBJECT: Chinese, Vietnamese and Soviet Perspectives on the Sino-Vietnamese Conflict and Implications for the US.

Introduction

While China's activities along its border with Vietnam remain at the low level announced by PRC leaders to the President and Secretary Shultz during the recent visit to Beijing, Chinese preparations for some type of naval/amphibious operation against Vietnam continue. This paper assesses the possible objective of these preparations, their prospects for success, probable Soviet response, and implications for the US.

China's Perspective

China's carefully calibrated show of force against Vietnam seems primarily designed to:

- signal Moscow that Beijing will not be cowed by Soviet intimidation tactics and the steady Soviet military buildup around China;
- convey the impression of US complicity--coming so soon after President Reagan's visit;
- embarrass Moscow and create new strains in Soviet-Vietnamese relations;
- imply a convergence of Sino-US security concerns in Asia and underscore China's importance in US strategic calculations.

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SOVA and OEA Analysts participated in the preparation of this memorandum.

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The Chinese have long believed that by keeping pressure on Vietnam they can sharpen what they believe are basically incompatible Soviet and Vietnamese interests and create tensions that eventually will lead to a falling out between Hanoi and Moscow. By keeping both guessing now about Beijing's ultimate military objectives, they hope Vietnam will make new demands on the Soviets for support that Moscow is unprepared to fulfill. The Chinese may have concluded that the USSR is unlikely to become directly involved in Sino-Vietnamese hostilities on the border or in the South China Sea. Beijing may therefore believe a show of force in the Spratlys--where Hanoi's ability to counter the Chinese on its own is limited--would sharpen Moscow's dilemma. But they will be careful to keep their actions below the level at which, in their opinion, Moscow would feel obliged to intervene.

Chinese leaders may also be determined to show for US consumption that China--unlike Japan or other US regional allies--has the means and the will to independently confront and contain the Soviets or a Soviet proxy and, therefore, should figure more prominently in US strategy. The Chinese clearly have been disturbed by what they regard as a US tendency over the past few years not to accord China the strategic importance they feel is their due.

Finally, Deng Xiaoping and his key lieutenants appear to have strengthened their domestic position over the past few months and face no serious opposition to opting for stepped up pressure on Hanoi--as long as such moves are limited and successful. There is always the risk, however, that Beijing will miscalculate the Vietnamese or Soviet response--especially if it decides to occupy the Vietnamese held islands in the Spratlys. Another military setback would hurt Deng's leadership, just as it apparently did in 1979.

#### Hanoi's Perspective

Although we are uncertain if Hanoi is aware of Chinese naval preparation and activity near the Spratly Islands, it has described Chinese ground attacks along the border as "the most serious act of war against our people since 1979." The Vietnamese have sharply increased their propaganda attacks against the Chinese, noting that high-level contacts between the US and the Chinese occurred before both the current and the 1979 attacks. Hanoi has also used the 30th anniversary of the battle at Dienbienphu to inspire its citizens with the "Dienbienphu Spirit" of resistance against Chinese aggression.

The Vietnamese were unhappy with what they viewed as hesitant Soviet support in the wake of the Chinese invasion in 1979 and are probably concerned that Moscow's dialogue with the Chinese will limit Soviet support in the current situation as well. While Moscow's cancellation of the Arkhipov visit to Beijing this week probably has given Hanoi temporary reassurance, the Vietnamese will look for a stronger response to any major increase in Chinese military actions.

#### The Soviet Perspective

Moscow probably recognizes that Chinese actions against Vietnam are designed to portray the USSR as an unreliable, impotent ally and to imply that the Chinese, backed by the US, can effectively challenge Soviet interests. The Soviets cannot be seen as completely passive in the face of this

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challenge. This calculus has already led it to postpone First Deputy Premier Arkhipov's long-planned trip to Beijing. Overall Soviet handling of the crisis thus far, however, suggests that the Soviets hope to get through the present crisis without anything more than a temporary interruption to their efforts to normalize relations with the Chinese.

Moscow's reaction will also be conditioned by its calculation that as a result of the \$2.7 billion in military aid provided Hanoi since 1979, nothing the Chinese do is likely to jeopardize the position of the regime in Hanoi or rupture the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship. Hanoi has no other policy alternative to its current dependence on the USSR, and odds are that any Chinese action against Vietnam is going to further cement the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship and increase Hanoi's naval facilities.

#### CHINESE MILITARY OPTIONS Attack Across the Border

We believe China recognizes the heavy costs and risks of escalation of launching another border-wide offensive similar to the 1979 incursion, especially in view of the buildup of Vietnamese defenses since that time. Nevertheless, we believe the ground and air forces China has moved to the border would be sufficient to undertake limited operations with good chances for success and with minimal risks of escalation.

#### Attack on Bach Long Vi (Nightingale) Islands

Beijing could elect to attack or attempt to seize Bach Long Vi Island in the Gulf of Tonkin as a demonstration of Chinese power and to attain a base from which to protect Chinese oil claims in the Gulf. Such an operation could be carried out in the context of increased activity along the China-Vietnam border following a Chinese feint toward the Spratly Islands. A Chinese assault on Bach Long Vi Island would encounter strong Vietnamese opposition with the risk of serious naval losses and of a costly air war. Although Chinese fighters would be available to provide fleet air defense, the Vietnamese have Sepal antiship missiles near Haiphong. The Sepal has a range that covers the entire Gulf of Tonkin and could be used effectively against the Chinese fleet. Such a confrontation in the Gulf would almost certainly lead to an air war in which China's numerically superior air power probably would wear down and eventually defeat the Vietnamese but not before taking heavy losses.

#### An Attack on the Spratly Islands

The Chinese could mount a naval operation to attack or occupy several or all nine Vietnamese-held islands in the Spratlys. This option probably would be in concert with an increase in Chinese military activity along the China-Vietnam border in order to maintain pressure on the Vietnamese on two fronts.

Bombardment. This option would carry relatively low risk of Chinese losses or of escalation and could be accomplished with the guns on destroyers and frigates in China's South Sea Fleet and with bombs delivered by TU-16 bombers currently based in southern China. Its objective would be to remind Vietnam of China's growing naval power in the South China Sea and to demonstrate the vulnerability of Vietnam's defenses on the islands.

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### Landings on the Spratlys

Amphibious landings on the Vietnamese-held Spratly Islands would entail considerably greater military risks for the Chinese than a hit-and-run operation, require a larger naval force, and take a longer time to accomplish. We believe, however, that the Chinese have the capability to overrun the islands using surface combatants and amphibious landing ships of the South Sea Fleet. We estimate that Vietnam has a total of only some 500 troops dispersed on all nine of the islands it now holds.

The size of the operation to seize the Spratlys and their distance from China's mainland would cause problems for the Chinese but not likely prevent success. China's ships lack modern air defense systems, would be out of range of China's land-based fighters, and within striking distance of Vietnamese aircraft. Maintaining control of the Spratlys would be exacerbated by the need to establish and sustain long, vulnerable supply lines. But we believe China's superiority over the Vietnamese in naval capabilities, including a large submarine force, would enable Beijing to challenge seriously any Vietnamese attempt to recapture the islands.

To avoid the possibility of a prolonged conflict, during which the Chinese would have to estimate that the Soviets would gradually bolster Vietnamese capabilities, the Chinese may have designed an option under which they would seize one or more islands, neutralize the Vietnamese garrison, destroy its positions, and then withdraw while claiming success. Although this option would entail the risk of the Vietnamese greatly fortifying the islands upon regaining them, the Chinese may estimate that this further drain on Vietnamese resources would be to China's benefit.

### SOVIET MILITARY OPTIONS

#### On the Sino Vietnamese Border

In a border conflict, Soviet forces that Moscow would be willing or able to send to Vietnam would have minimal military impact. Unlike the Mideast, Soviet intervention in the border fighting would have to be quite substantial--on the order of 2-3 armies or more--to have more than a symbolic impact. Such an intervention probably would take a few months to affect and forces would have to be moved and supported by a long sea bridge running the length past the Chinese coast. Small airborne forces could be introduced more quickly--probably in a week or so--but would add little to Vietnamese military capabilities. In sum, Moscow probably would not consider any land or air force intervention in the border fighting to be a viable option.

#### In the Spratly Islands

If the conflict focused on the Spratly Islands, however, Soviet forces, on hand, could exert a greater influence, should they be committed. The forces that the Chinese could bring to bear are relatively small and poorly equipped. The combination of Soviet warships and naval strike aircraft at Cam Ranh probably could prevent a small Chinese amphibious assault on the Spratlys--if the task force were detected beforehand--or at least make the Chinese position there untenable if the islands were seized. Such an option is more plausible, both militarily and politically than intervention in the

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border fighting, but also requires the more difficult political decision to involve Soviet forces directly in the fighting.

If the Soviets decided to strengthen their forces already in the area, warships from the Pacific fleet bases in the Vladivostok area could begin to arrive in the South China Sea and more bombers deploy to Cam Ranh in a week or so. Such forces would be capable of denying China naval or air access to the Spratlys, even in the face of a much greater Chinese effort than is now apparent.

Moscow could support Vietnam without involving itself directly in the conflict. In the immediate term they could step up their reconnaissance activities in the South China Sea and provide the Vietnamese with the results. Over the longer term, they could expedite delivery of more advanced air and naval antiship missiles to better enable the Vietnamese to counter future Chinese attacks there or retake the islands, if necessary. They may also increase coordination with the Vietnamese and possibly provide the Vietnamese with additional reconnaissance means. At the very least and no matter what the outcome of the present tensions, we expect the Soviets will replace Vietnamese losses and probably provide additional military aid.

#### On the Sino-Soviet Border

The Soviets could attempt to divert Chinese attention from the Vietnam region either by staging maneuvers on the border or launching an expedition into Chinese territory. But maneuvers probably would not intimidate the Chinese while a crossborder operation would entail higher risks than the Soviets would want to run on behalf of a valuable but pesky ally.

#### Against a Chinese Ally

The Soviets may choose to retaliate against Chinese actions against Vietnam by taking action against Pakistani territory. This option would have no direct effect on any Sino-Vietnamese confrontation but would be part of the larger regional balancing game. Afghan insurgent camps and lines of communications close to the border present tempting targets. Air attacks against them would support current Soviet operations in the Panjsher valley, entail little risk, be a reminder to China and the US that one of their allies is vulnerable to Soviet action, and place additional pressure on Zia to be more accommodating to Soviet desires in the Afghan conflict. Although the Soviets would run little military risk through actions of this sort, they would have to consider the possibility that the US would respond by stepping up its support of Pakistan--a development that would run counter to the interests of India which may in turn choose to respond by further diversifying its arms acquisition efforts. On balance, however, the Pakistan option would be the least risky and most supportive of the Soviet Union's own interests.

#### Conclusion

We believe Soviet military involvement in direct support of Vietnam is unlikely because the costs and risks involved are not commensurate with the threat to Vietnam. We cannot, however, rule out Soviet involvement if the Chinese occupy the Spratly Islands because of the challenge this would represent to Soviet credibility as an ally and a superpower.

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IMPLICATION FOR THE US

A Chinese attack in the Spratlys could result in fairly large scale air and naval action, widespread international concern, and voluminous Soviet propaganda charging Chinese aggression with US collusion. A successful Chinese attack on one of the island targets would demonstrate Chinese regional strength and strategic skill. It would set back Sino-Soviet talks for some time.

The most important implication for the US of any Sino-Vietnamese confrontation over the Spratlys is its likely effect on Soviet policy. Because the Chinese can probably succeed in a maritime attack against one of these Vietnamese targets unless the Soviets get directly involved, such a Chinese move would directly challenge Soviet credibility as a superpower and reliability as a supporter of its clients around the world. Whether or not the Soviets respond actively and immediately to that challenge, it is likely to enhance already existing Soviet interest in taking initiatives against the US wherever it can to underscore its credibility as an effective superpower. Should the Soviets fail to act, they will feel pressures to compensate elsewhere for failure. If they do intervene, they will be inclined to see their action as necessitated by combined US-Chinese pressures on them. This perception and motivation is likely to strengthen the anti-US priority in Soviet policy.

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